



Louise Cooper

large chunk of fantasy generally, these days, doesn't move me either, particularly the more twee stuff. A lot of it is terribly beautiful and soothing, but I find that sort of thing rather soft, a little too genteel. I like something with an edge to it."

In the 70s, Cooper worked as a secretary, copy writer and blurb writer for publishers New English Library and, later, Sphere. "During this period I wrote a couple of horror novels and some supernatural romances. Soppy stories, basically! I was also doing freelance copy-editing and so forth to keep the wolf from the door.

"I was very lucky, because working in publishing they quite often wanted somebody to do commissions, and I was well placed to land them. They'd pay £150 or £300 or something like that, and I did quite a few under pseudonyms. That was good training. Working to a tight deadline and within very specific format was good discipline.

"The recession's hit publishing very badly now, of course, and there doesn't seem to be quite as

much bandwagon publishing of that kind as there was up to a few years ago. One or two authors would write a book that really hit the jackpot, and all the publishers would come along and say, 'Right, we want a dozen books like that this year; let's find the people to write them.' I think that's gone. Add to that the demise of the mid-list and it looks depressing, a bit disheartening. It's sad for anyone who's trying to start now."

Eventually she found an agent who encouraged her to concentrate on fantasy. "She read *Lord of No Time* and suggested I turn it into a trilogy. She told me there was nothing particularly underhand about doing that because it would be a totally different project. So I did, and she sold it to the States on a synopsis and sample chapter."

Her brand of fantasy is concerned with character and plot; she is less interested in the surrounding paraphernalia. So there is a limit to the amount of research undertaken. "Except in terms of something like a ship, say. I may want to know what the difference between the main mast and the

mizzenmast is. Or how you rig a foresail. You've got to get those sort of details right. Weapons are another example. But I have to admit that if one of my characters gets into a sword or knife fight I make the details hazy enough not to give away my complete lack of knowledge!"

"What interests me more is what's going on in people's minds. Stories where a great amount of detail is to the fore don't appeal to me, although I know that kind of thing does interest a lot of people. There are fantasy readers who love fine detail, hence all the wargaming, model-making and so on. That sort of activity can be superb; I really admire the skill and insight displayed by these people, but I think I'm probably too lazy to get into that to any extent."

"Talking of the kind of fannish side of things, there's a young man from Liverpool who, completely out of the blue, recently sent me a role-player's guide to the world of Time Master. I was absolutely astounded. It was a terrific compliment. It's about 30,000 words long and beautifully done. He asked my

And DNA was everywhere. And inside it were always the Glyphics.

Aside from killing us if we tried to tamper with our own minds, what other more subtle functions did they perform? To what intellectual frameworks and perspectives did they confine us? Did they define our rationality? They clearly acted as our intellectual blinkers. What might we be capable of without this genetic graffiti?

That the Glyphics had been implanted was now widely accepted. The DNA of species on each planet had many similarities, reflecting common ancestors, but planet to planet variations were colossal. Yet the Glyphics were always there in barely altered forms, resistant unlike the millions of other codon chains to the usual mutagenetic mechanisms of radiation and chemicals.

Neuroarchaeology had been born out of humankind's perception of its prison. A science less than fifty years old, it commanded astronomical budgets to obtain the DNA of dead or nascent species.

Now by an incredible stroke of luck we'd found a species alive and about to overtake us in bioengineering terms at least. We would have to watch our trailblazers carefully.

I stopped again and scanned this unpleasant world. "Why me? Why now?" I thought. "I'm too old for the terrible truths." With a sigh, I blazed my own trail back to the Lander.

I began to wake with vague feelings of despair. Even after coming to I'd spend hours turning restlessly in my cot.

Mikey's feelings too seemed to confuse him. His natural enthusiasm, normally boundless, had become sporadic and interspersed with silence and depression. I remembered his dedication and brilliance and how by careful meticulous study he'd discovered the caldera from his analyses of the returning memories from automated probes. Though only a postgraduate student then it had earned him the right to accompany me on this expedition, leapfrogging many more senior colleagues in the process.

He still looked healthy even though his eyes seemed to reflect some awful loss. His patterning cycle excluded the greys and blacks of winter, skipping instead straight to spring. Normal flesh tones had reappeared and were becoming stippled with bright green tracings. It didn't seem appropriate.

"It couldn't be more perfect," he said to me one day during an "up" period as we chaffed through the data checking for novel developmental indices. We were in the tiny recreation area, created by retracting the partition wall between our cabins.

"I mean they're way too contained to be a threat to Earth and their technology's for shit. They haven't even colonized further than a couple of hundred klicks. We could afford real contact."

"Maybe later. If they survive."

"Easy. They're tough."

The Builders had been too, I reflected but kept it to myself. Squat and thick-skinned with lots of meat, they'd had lasers and atomics and nanotechnology. They'd chewed out vast trenches on their neighbouring planet and constructed huge generators that cracked the permafrost, making air and filling the

trenches with ocean. Then they'd disappeared within 800 years, barely five of their lively generations.

"Professor Helver, Dr Marillo," Ed interrupted gently. "I'm sorry to bother you but one of our remotes has picked up something of possible interest."

The watchword of AIs was understatement. Mikey and I exchanged glances then we were squeezing down the narrow corridor to the Obs Room. He got there first and froze. I had to stand on tiptoes to get a look. When I saw the viewpit I stumbled back in disbelief. The sudden perception of vulnerability hit me like a rock.

The scene showed a table of rock viewed from a remote at a higher elevation. Spelled out in letters made from travel tube creatures were just two words: FREE US

I spent the next few hours telling myself how impossible this all was. The Bugs had no electronics, no radios, no lasers. Their terrain was the organic, the microscopic. They shouldn't have been aware of our remote, they shouldn't have been aware of us. They shouldn't have understood English. Anthropomorphized Bugs was something I was just too queasy to deal with.

Ed performed long-range interrogative checks on the remote's onboard AI. He eventually came back deeply ashamed but with some answers. We listened numbly to his contrite tones.

The Bugs up to now haven't been subterranean creatures. In fact no burrowing creatures longer than a few millimetres exist within several hundred kilometres."

"They dug a tunnel?"

"Correct. Depth scans were only performed during the first five months with no appreciable changes recorded. Attention levels were therefore distributed to more apparently significant studies."

"Didn't you detect the excavations?"

"The effect of the pulsers on the rock is minuscule. The Bugs are small, they live in a fluid medium which is highly sensitive to the planet's random seismic activity. They're intelligent enough to mimic it."

"And intelligent enough to understand English?"

"Ah, now there," said the AI very softly, "I really can't help you."

I was still pretty screwed up but I'd managed to do some thinking of my own. "I'd guess induction," I refilled my glass from the plastic bottle of Scotch we'd been working our way through. "Their bodies are full of electrolytes. If they got close enough to, say, the AIs' aerial feed they might've felt it."

Relief washed across Mikey's face. "And the AIs send back images overlaid with text. For a second there..."

"Yeah. It looked like they had a whole technology we didn't know about."

"But how could they have deciphered it?" asked Ed with some interest.

Traditionally ships' AIs displayed themselves as whirling digital patterns on screens set above the viewpits. Some sort of focus was always better than a disembodied voice. I stared at Ed's grimly.

"By altering situations in the caldera, by creating events and seeing how the remote's signals back to the ship changed. In effect by prodding and poking